



Above: Peter Greste and Richard Roxburgh. For Roxburgh, ensuring that the movie's depiction of Greste didn't trivialise his prison ordeal was a "huge responsibility".

DOUBLE TAKE

When journalist Peter Greste was languishing in a prison cell in Egypt, he couldn't imagine freedom – much less that, a decade later, Richard Roxburgh would be playing him in a film about his ordeal.

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ELEVEN YEARS ago, when Al Jazeera correspondent Peter Greste was being thrown into a Cairo prison on charges of aiding a terrorist organisation, Richard Roxburgh was preparing to play the voice of Flip, the grasshopper in the animated comedy adventure, *Maya the Bee*.

Yes, I know, that's a rather – how shall we put it – *flip* way of starting a serious story about a distinguished journalist denied his freedom, together with a brilliant character actor chosen to portray him a decade after his release.

Nonetheless, this is when these two men's futures began to unknowingly collide: Peter Greste, the Australian foreign correspondent turned political prisoner, and Richard Roxburgh, the commanding Australian screen and stage presence turned warm-hearted insect.

"I was thinking if I could nail Flip, then Peter was the next obvious choice," Roxburgh jokes now.

Of course, there was nothing funny, then or now, about what happened to Peter Greste in the Egyptian winter of 2013. Asked by his employers at Al Jazeera's English-language news channel to cover for a colleague

for a few weeks in Cairo over the Christmas period, Greste found himself caught up in the deadly politics of a country in revolutionary chaos.

As Greste would later recount, it all started with a knock on his door at Cairo's Marriott Hotel, just as he was preparing to go for a swim in the hotel pool, Triple J music streaming from his computer. Greste opened the door and there was a group of men with their leader, a leather-jacketed man, demanding: "Mr Peter?"

"Yes...and who are you?" Greste replied, as the men burst past him and began scouring his possessions. They were from Egypt's feared Ministry of the Interior and their leader was about to issue a chilling command: "You will come with us."

That was December 29, 2013, the beginning of what would turn into a 400-day hell-ride of incarceration – including solitary confinement, interrogations, a sham trial and endless, corrosive uncertainty inside a corrupt and thuggish legal system.

With Al Jazeera, the Qatar-based global media network, considered by

Egyptian authorities to have close links to the newly outlawed Muslim Brotherhood, Greste, together with his colleagues Egyptian-born Canadian journalist Mohamed Fahmy and Egyptian journalist Baher Mohamed, were about to be charged with being a member of a terrorist organisation; financing a terrorist organisation; supporting a terrorist organisation, and knowingly broadcasting false information to "spread fear and discontent".

Their arrests shocked the world. Six months later, shock turned to outrage when Greste and Fahmy were sentenced to seven years in prison, and Mohamed to 10 years. The trial was denounced by international observers as almost comically flawed, the prosecution's evidence comprising, in part, a program about sheep farming, a press conference in Kenya and a song by Australian musician Gotye.

As the verdict was being read and Greste was grasping its import, he began banging the steel holding cage where he and his colleagues were held. His parents, Juris and Lois, on hearing the news,





exclaimed, “My god, my god... that’s absolutely crazy.” The then US secretary of state John Kerry condemned the sentence as “chilling and draconian”, while Australia’s then foreign minister Julie Bishop decried the decision: “We are deeply dismayed by the fact that a sentence has been imposed and we are appalled by the severity of it.”

As were fellow journalists, politicians, human rights activists, civil society groups and concerned citizens around the world, including Richard Roxburgh.

“I remember vividly following the arrest and trial,” Roxburgh tells *Good Weekend*, “and the shock that came with the fact they were going to put him away. And then the fact that it just seemed to be going on and on without resolution, and without any sort of foreseeable way that the Australian government could spring him out.”

In his fledgling days as an actor, Roxburgh had considered journalism an alternative career. “It’s a profession that I’ve [always] had enormous respect for,” he says, “and the idea of being a foreign correspondent was something that had actually entered my own head around the time that acting was there. So it’s always been something that I respected... and was kind of in awe of.”

PPETER GRESTE had spent nearly 25 years reporting from trouble spots around the world before his arrest in Egypt in 2013. He’d covered Bosnia during the Balkan wars of the 1990s, Afghanistan before and after Al Qaeda sent its hijacked planes into the World Trade Centre; and Somalia, considered by some to be the world’s most dangerous place, and where, in 2005, his producer Kate Peyton was killed in what Greste believes was a targeted assassination

He’d travelled through more than 90 countries across Europe, Latin America, the Middle East and Africa,



*Left: Greste on assignment in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2013. Top: (from left) Baher Mohamed, Greste and Mohamed Fahmy at their 2014 trial, where they faced charges of having links to a terrorist organisation. Above: the same court scene depicted in upcoming film *The Correspondent*.*

working variously for Reuters TV, CNN, WTN and the BBC, for which he’d won the prestigious Peabody Award for his documentary on Somalia. That was in 2011, shortly before he joined Al Jazeera as its East Africa correspondent, a few months before the so-called “Arab Spring” began sweeping North Africa and the Middle East.

Al Jazeera was, as Greste would later describe, “the renegade network”, established in Qatar in 1996 as the first independent news channel in the Arab world, following the BBC’s decision to close its Arabic language TV news service.

Initially, the network was considered a mouthpiece for Islamic extremism, particularly after it chose to broadcast footage of Osama bin Laden less than a month after hijacked planes had been flown into the World Trade Centre and Pentagon.

And, yet, by 2011, then US secretary of state Hillary Clinton was praising Al Jazeera, crediting it with providing “real news” unlike the mainstream networks’ “round-the-clock” diet of commercials and “talking heads”.

That was not a view shared in Egypt, certainly not after the overthrow in July 2013 of the country’s first democratically elected president Mohammed Morsi, leader of the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Morsi had come to power in 2012, 16 months after the toppling of president Hosni Mubarak, the Egyptian dictator who had ruled Egypt for 30 years. Mubarak’s overthrow was part of the wave of pro-democracy protests that had begun in Tunisia in late 2010 and then spread – often with catastrophic consequences – to neighbouring Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain.

In Egypt, Mubarak’s ouster ultimately led to Morsi’s Muslim Brotherhood assuming power, the first time in its history that the Islamist organisation had both legal and political power.

Egypt was the birthplace of the Brotherhood and, since the 1920s, had inspired thousands of independent social and political organisations around the world, including militant Sunni Islamist groups like Al-Qaeda and Hamas.

Morsi's increasing authoritarianism, his failure to tackle worsening economic conditions and his decision to enshrine Islamic law in the new constitution all contributed to wild and unprecedented demonstrations across the country, resulting in his removal from power in July 2013 by then defence minister Abdul Fattah al-Sisi, the man who would soon become Egyptian president.

By the time Greste was touching down in Cairo, five months after Morsi's ousting, Sisi's security forces had shot dead hundreds of Brotherhood supporters and arrested tens of thousands of others. He'd also declared the Muslim Brotherhood an outlawed terrorist organisation.

In the course of their work as journalists, Greste and his colleagues had spoken to members of the Brotherhood, but the idea that they were linked to the organisation was ludicrous. As Greste would soon discover, however, this had less to do with him and his colleagues, and far more to do with the war being waged around the world against journalistic independence.

WHEN I see Richard Roxburgh at the *Good Weekend* offices in North Sydney, my first thought is, "there's Peter Greste", even though Richard Roxburgh looks nothing like Peter Greste. But having just seen a preview of *The Correspondent*, the film in which Roxburgh plays Greste, I'm momentarily disoriented by one of cinema's more cunning little tricks. We sometimes confuse the actor with the character he's just played.

Had I been meeting Roxburgh, say, last year, last decade or last century, I might have equally thought, there goes Cleaver Greene (*Rake*), Roger Rogerson (*Blue Murder*), Percy Grainger (*Passion*), the Duke (*Moulin Rouge*), Bob Hawke (*Hawke*), Vernon Presley (*Elvis*), Sherlock Holmes (*The Hound of the Baskervilles*), Count Dracula (*Van Helsing*), Hamlet (on stage at Sydney's Belvoir St Theatre)...any one of scores of roles that Roxburgh has brilliantly executed over a lifetime.

Peter Greste is waiting for us upstairs, and it seems clear from the warm embrace he and Roxburgh exchange that there is mutual respect and affection. The pair first met at *GQ Australia* magazine's "Men of the Year" awards in Sydney in 2016, nearly two years after Greste had been removed from Egypt under presidential order. Roxburgh was there to receive the "acting legend" award; Greste, the "man of chivalry" gong.

"I was up there for best haircut," the perfectly bald Greste jests.

"I was probably just being given accolades for Flip, the Grasshopper," Roxburgh retorts with the actor's perfect timing. (Flip is proving a fabulous icebreaker for a conversation that will inevitably take us into dark places.)

I begin by asking Greste whether he requested Roxburgh to play him. "I didn't dare imagine too much about who might be willing to take it on," he replies. "But when Richard's name popped up, I've got to admit I was really quite blown away. Obviously I'd known Richard's work over the years."

"Had you seen Flip, the grasshopper?" Roxburgh asks, deadpan.

Greste, laughing: "When I saw Flip, I thought, 'That's the guy I want.'"

Truth be told, Roxburgh was terrified of taking on the character of Greste, of interpreting his experience in jail and, more generally, of doing justice to the journalist's career.

"There was a lot that I was troubled by," he says. "I really respected Peter. I respected what he went through. So there [was] the matter of making sure that [the film]

in no way undermined or trivialised that. It was just a huge responsibility, and I didn't want to take it lightly."

The two spoke and texted regularly before and during filming. They discussed prison, journalism, world affairs, Roxburgh forever asking questions, Greste delighting in the actor's curiosity.

Their lack of physical similarity was irrelevant to Roxburgh. In fact, it probably gave him more freedom to – as he puts it – "emotionally and spiritually embody the story of [Greste's] imprisonment".

"One of the things you said to me very early on," Greste says now, turning to the actor, "is 'I'm not trying to impersonate you.' And I actually took great comfort from that idea – that you weren't trying to adopt my mannerisms and my character, that you were bringing your own interpretation to the role. And I thought that was a really respectful way of handling it."

Was Roxburgh thinking, "How do I inhabit the skin of a journalist or a prisoner?"

"I guess [I was] thinking more, 'I'm a human being.' Obviously journalism [was] front and centre, because that's why he was put [in prison] but, really, I was just focusing on 'This is a human being that this has happened to.'"

"Yes, he's a journalist, and that's incredibly central to the story, but my job was to empathetically embody that experience, the confusion of it, the Kafkaesque horror of it, the seeming never-endingness of it, and what personal impacts that had across that time."

"My job was to empathetically embody (Greste's) experience, the confusion of it, the Kafkaesque horror..."

FIVE DAYS after his arrest, Peter Greste found himself in solitary confinement, struggling to breathe through the panic attacks, enraged by the unjustness of his imprisonment, fearing what was to come.

It was in that 2.5-square-metre cell – inside the notorious Tora Liman maximum-security prison in south Cairo – that he first heard the voice of the British-Egyptian activist, writer and political prisoner Alaa Abd El-Fattah. "Hello, Peter, and welcome to Tora Liman," Alaa said. "You are in the political wing of our prison. You won't be allowed out of your cell until the warden decides you've had enough."

For the next 10 days, Greste struggled with his mental stability, with his frequent wild swings between hope and despair, and with the clawing sense that the mistakes he'd made in his previous marriage might have contributed to his current predicament. Yes, he was imagining the laws of karma at work.

"I was wrestling with all these sorts of questions," he says now, "until I had [another] conversation with Alaa Abd El-Fattah, who was an extraordinary human being, a wonderful, incredible,



Above: the late Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny spoke of "prison Zen". Right: journalists Daniel Pearl and James Foley (above right) were both murdered.



intelligent guy – much younger than me – who said, 'Look, you need to look at the politics of this. I don't think the universe has a particular view on why you're here. You've got to see this isn't about you, or anything you've done, but about what you've come to represent.' He also gave Greste another piece of crucial advice: "You cannot make it through prison – you will not survive, certainly not with your sanity intact – unless you are able to make peace with yourself."

How to do that? Perhaps as Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny recommended before being allegedly murdered last year: by cultivating a "prison Zen", by recognising that one can be, not just the sum of one's politics – in his case, a free Russia – but also an exemplar for the human spirit.

"The important thing," Navalny wrote in his prison diaries, "is not to torment yourself with anger, hatred, fantasies of revenge, but to move instantly to acceptance. That can be hard."

"I resonate very powerfully with those comments," Greste says. "In a lot of ways, I came to abandon hope, and that's not in the sense that you give up or quit. I think it's exactly what Alexei spoke of. It's about acceptance. It's about accepting the reality of... the moment."

"I felt that the greatest form of resistance was survival. The whole point of prison is to wear you down and, for me, if I couldn't physically break out of prison, then my strongest form of resistance was survival, and the capacity to adapt and deal with the realities of the four walls that I was faced with."

Luckily for Greste, he'd learnt how to meditate years earlier, after his marriage had collapsed. He'd enrolled in a 10-day vipassana course where, for up to 10 hours each day, he sat with eyes closed, focusing on only bodily sensations and the content of his mind. No reading. No writing. No communicating with anyone else.

And so when the cell door slammed inside Tora Liman prison, he realised he was capable of dealing with his confinement. "I had tools in all sorts of ways I really didn't anticipate," he says. "Vipassana gave me the capacity to deal with a lot of the really toxic emotions that often bubble up in those kinds of environments."

But what about Roxburgh? One thing, surely, to act the part, quite another to live it? Was he capable of existing inside his own head? Did he meditate?

"I dip in and out of [meditation]," he replies, "but I find it an incredibly useful mechanism...for regulating and resetting everything on a daily basis. I haven't done a vipassana, because the idea of 10 days sitting cross-legged on wooden boards...I just don't know..."

"But what also really interested me about the idea of doing this [film] is...in a way, the weird opportunity that prison affords you as a human being. I know that sounds mad, and it's not always the case, but to be in a place where you're forced into a self-reckoning, [forced] to examine all the things about yourself because you have all the time in the world to do it."

"I think that's really fascinating, and I think that that's something that's been touched on really beautifully in this film."

"It's funny you say that," Greste says to Roxburgh, "because one of the things I remember very vividly when I was in solitary confinement, one of the other prisoners came past and stood outside [my] door. I was talking to him about how this kind of isolation was really challenging for me, and I

think he misunderstood what I was saying and he said, 'Yes, it's a gift, isn't it? This is what monks and sages seek half their lives, this kind of isolation and the chance for self-reflection.' And I heard that and I thought, 'He's actually, right. Maybe I'm approaching this the wrong way.'"

As for how he imagines he would cope with prison, Roxburgh admits he felt deeply uncomfortable during the filming of *The Correspondent*, given that most of it was shot inside a decommissioned mental asylum in

Sydney. “It’s never a pleasure working inside prison,” he says. “And you do think when they close those doors each time: ‘How would I? How could I? What would I?’”

“A lot of [the filming] was in underground cells where, to see any light, you had to look up and through bars. It was unbearably hot in summertime... the conditions were horrendous. I’m not daring to draw a line between my experience and Peter’s at all, [but] it was horrific filming [and] I think it probably had to be to achieve any semblance of truth.”

ALMOST THREE YEARS after Peter Greste’s release from prison, he published *The First Casualty*, at once a prison memoir, a history of the “War on Terror” and a gripping account of how journalistic independence had become a target for despots, Islamic extremists and democratically elected leaders alike.

Think Daniel Pearl, *The Wall Street Journal’s* South Asian bureau chief, kidnapped, then butchered, in 2002 by Islamic militants. Think James Foley, the American journalist abducted, then beheaded, by Islamic State after trying to document the suffering of the Syrian people. His compatriot Steven Sotloff suffered the same fate two weeks later.

Let’s not forget also the attack on the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo’s* Paris office in 2015, where 12 people, including eight journalists and cartoonists, were slaughtered by Islamic extremists. Nor the fact of returned US President Donald Trump’s repeated denunciations of the media as the “enemy of the American people”, along with a raft of national security laws passed in Australia since the 9/11 attacks on America and their impingements on freedom of speech.

Thanks to political activist Alaa Abd El-Fattah, Peter Greste came to realise in prison that his and his colleagues’ experience was part of a larger conflict between “journalism and belligerents” on both sides of what had become known as the War on Terror.

This helped Greste not just survive but also find meaning in what was happening to him. One of the books he read in his 13 months’ incarceration was Victor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning*, the landmark account of his experience of a Nazi concentration camp. “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing,” Frankl wrote, “the last of the human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”

“I still get goosebumps when I hear that,” Greste offers now. “If you don’t have control over your own circumstances, you do have control over the way that you think about it and approach it and understand it. And if you’re aware of that sense of agency, then it gives you a power that I don’t think people fully appreciate.

“That’s not to dismiss the loss of freedom, and that is a very difficult thing to take away from somebody. But equally, if you are in a position, as I was, where that freedom is gone, understanding and recognising that you still have the control over the way that you think about the situation that you’re in... is also quite liberating.”

WHEN FREEDOM finally came for Peter Greste, it came suddenly, almost shockingly. “I have news,” said the senior prison officer. “You are going.”

“Going?” Greste replied. “Where? You mean you are moving me to another prison?”

“No. You are going home. Back to Australia. The embassy is coming now. Maybe in half an hour.”

Greste didn’t know this immediately, but he was being removed from Egypt under a presidential decree from Egyptian President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi. He returned to his cell, his mind reeling from the dawning recognition that his 400-day incarceration was over. He’d been about to start a hunger strike, but now he was a tangle of contradictions, particularly given that his cellmate and Al Jazeera colleague, Baher Mohamed,



Above: Greste went on a 21-day hunger strike in London to support Laila Souef, the mother of jailed British Egyptian activist Alaa Abd El-Fattah.

was embracing him, telling him how beautiful it was that he – Greste – was going home.

Never mind that Baher Mohamed was remaining behind bars – so too Mohamed Fahmy and the students arrested at the same time as them. Baher was ecstatic for the Australian journalist’s liberation, and he willed him now to go in good conscience. (Baher Mohamed and Mohamed Fahmy were given a presidential pardon and released seven months after Greste.)

“It took a while for it to actually seep into my bones,” Greste recalls. “But I was also really ashamed. I was ashamed and embarrassed that my colleagues had to stay in prison. I felt real agony of having to leave them behind.

“So there was this mix of confusion, of discombobulation, disorientation, of this kind of intellectualised joy that I knew I ought to be feeling, but I couldn’t feel the joy that I wanted to because my colleagues were still locked up, were still having to endure that prison.”

In one of the most powerful scenes in *The Correspondent*, Roxburgh manages to embody these swirling, contradictory emotions, putting on the fresh-looking checked shirt that he seems to have kept for this very moment, then crumbling against the prison wall, shaking and weeping with both torment and relief.

Had the two men discussed this passage of the film? No, they hadn’t,

but when Greste saw Roxburgh carry off the moment – indeed, every moment he was on screen (which happens to be every scene in the film!) – he felt both humbled and relieved. “This is one of the things that I think is really beautiful about the film,” the journalist says. “It’s not the kind of classic Hollywood happy ending. It’s a really conflicted, emotional ride, and that is exactly how it was at the time.

“There was all sorts of turmoil going on inside me, and so when I saw that scene, and saw the way that Richard had portrayed it, and saw the tears, I immediately felt that that was the right tone. That is exactly what I was experiencing. There were tears of joy, but there was also this real anguish about the prospect of going and leaving my colleagues, and all of the other emotions that were churning away inside me at the time.”

And, naturally, this came as sweet music to Roxburgh’s ears. “It was a huge relief,” he admits. “It was obviously something I felt enormous pressure about, and was very keen to hear about... how Peter had responded to the film. It was absolutely central to the whole thing.”

What remains central to this story is also that Peter Greste’s young prison mentor, Alaa Abd El-Fattah, still languishes in prison and that, at the time of writing, his 68-year-old maths professor mother Laila Souef was nearly four months into a hunger strike.

Alaa is one of an estimated 60,000 political prisoners currently behind bars in Egypt, a matter not lost on either Greste or Roxburgh. “You raised this earlier, Richard,” says Greste. “There are still people that I was imprisoned with who have no right to be there. If anything, they should be on pedestals and lionised as heroes of Egypt, [and they] are still suffering. I’m very conscious of the fact that I left people behind.”

So conscious that on January 16 this year, Greste flew to London to begin a 21-day hunger strike in solidarity with Laila Souef and all those campaigning for her son’s release from prison. “I’ve been wrestling with wanting to help Alaa for ages,” he tells *Good Weekend* 12 hours before boarding his flight. “There was not much I could do from here... until I saw that his mum had gone on a hunger strike, and that’s when I decided that’s what I would do.

“I know [some] people will draw a connection between the hunger strike and the film but that would be wrong. This is not a publicity stunt. This is about supporting Alaa and helping him get out of prison. Period.”

Having worked as a war correspondent for decades, Greste has witnessed shocking examples of human suffering. Today, there are few – if any – days that pass where he is not conscious of his own good fortune. “One of the reasons I’m here and not still in prison is because my name just happens to be Peter and not Mohamed. And so I am constantly grateful for that gift, not just of freedom, but living in a relatively safe, prosperous, happy country.”

Not just grateful, but determined to put that gratitude to best use. Since his release from prison, Greste, together with lawyer Chris Flynn and communications consultant Peter Wilkinson (a former journalist himself) have worked through their organisation – Alliance for Journalists’ Freedom – to promote the right of journalists to report the news in freedom and safety.

That is proving an increasingly challenging task, given that in 2024 more than 360 journalists around the world were jailed merely for doing their jobs, while in the Middle East, nearly 170 journalists and media workers were killed, most of them in Gaza.

Greste believes his dedication to this work has helped minimise symptoms normally associated with post-traumatic stress disorder. Wilkinson agrees, saying he’s personally seen no obvious signs of trauma: “He had stories to tell, of course, but there was just no weirdness about him. I’ve come across people who have been through terrible situations and once you’ve had a few drinks [with them] something comes out. With Peter, nothing came out.”

Who can truly know, of course, the effect that prison might have had on Greste’s psyche and, by extension, his wider relationships. But one certain consequence is that his work as a foreign correspondent has been severely curtailed, the reason being that following his deportation from Egypt in 2015, he was convicted again – in absentia – at a retrial. His colleagues were also convicted but, unlike Greste, they were ultimately given a presidential pardon. As a result, while Greste still travels abroad, he makes sure not to visit countries that have extradition treaties with Egypt.

In other words, Peter Greste remains a convicted terrorist. “I need to be very, very careful,” he says. “There is still a prison cell waiting for me in Egypt.” ■

The Correspondent will have its Sydney premiere on March 16, followed by Q&A sessions with Greste and Roxburgh nationwide ahead of an April 17 cinema release.

PODCAST



Scan this code to hear Peter Greste and Richard Roxburgh discuss the challenges of making *The Correspondent* on *GW Talks*, wherever you get your podcasts.

